ALL THE RAGE: FOR OLUWALE AND DESTRUCTION OF THE NATIONAL FRONT

SONIA BOYCE

Rasheed Araeen, *For Oluwale*, 1971-3 (1975). Mixed media collage on board. 4 panels, each 60 x 60 cm. Courtesy the artist © Rasheed Araeen

POLICE RIOT IN BROCKWELL PARK

BROCKWELL PARK
June 23

-Rally

-March

-Public Meeting

enough is enough

POLICE ATTACK BLACK YOUTH

CALLING ALL PEOPLE OF OUR COMMUNITY TO Demonstrate AGAINST OPPRESSION

ASSAULTED

The brutal attack on black people while carrying themselves at the Brockwell park fete on Saturday was the black community of South London. On September 8th a barefoot, barefaced lad, 16 years old, was beaten into the hard with hammers and wet handles at the peckham fair by constable. On that occasion the police refused to arrest the attackers, even when they were identified, although 15 black youths were arrested. As a result of the incident a demonstration was called which was organised by no black youths...

★ ★ ★

BRING CASTLE TO JUSTICE

FREEDOM NEWS special

JUNE 1973

PUBLISHED BY BLACK WORKERS' MOVEMENT

POLICE TERROR MUST STOP

FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS THE POLICE HAVE BECOME MORE AND MORE BLATANT IN THEIR ATTEMPT TO SUPPRESS THE RESISTANCE OF OUR COMMUNITY. THESE OUTRAGEOUS ATTACKS ON BLACK PEOPLE HAVE BECOME MORE AND MORE VIOLENT AND CULMINATED IN THE POLICE RIOT IN BROCKWELL PARK ON SATURDAY 7TH, WHERE CAN THE FUTURE OF THE SPECIAL PATROL GROUP TO OUR COMMUNITY BE. AT THE BLACK WORKERS MOVEMENT STRONGLY BELIEVE THAT SOMETHIN MUST BE DONE TO BRING THESE ATTACKS TO AN END... WE HAVE TO ORGANISE OURSELVES TO RESIST. THIS IS A DOCUMENTATION OF SOME OF THE ATTACKS BY POLICE ON BLACK PEOPLE. WE ARE CALLING FOR ALL PEOPLE OF OUR COMMUNITY TO DEMONSTRATE AGAINST THE GROWING POLICE TERROR IN SOUTH LONDON.

BRING POLICE CRIMINALS TO JUSTICE

The names listed in this special issue of FREEDOM NEWS, shows the concerted need to which the black community is being victimised by government forces - the police. It is therefore, because each act of victimisation forms the basis against the wall, and as a result resistance in the community are provoked by the activities of this "heavy mob".

Recognising that the criminal activities of the police is one of the major contributors to deteriorating relations in this community, a meeting held on Brixton Town Hall, earlier this year, drew the attack on a black social worker, passed two resolutions, (1) calling for an independent community investigation into the criminal activities of Brixton police and (2) for the police to be made responsible to the community.

Since the various government institutions, bodies and officials have shown to ignore the wishes of the community, we the victims, are calling on other victims and the community, to join us in organising to reverse this explosive situation, by bringing these criminals to justice.

BROTHER CHARGED FOR DEFENDING BLACK PEOPLE ACQUITTED

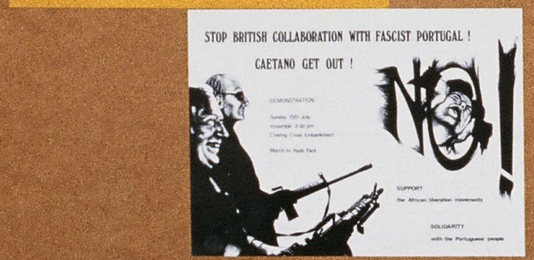
Brother Joel was savagely dragged from the back of the police van by the police as the other brothers looked on helplessly at the 3th. Brother Joel was charged with the use of threatening behaviour and assaulting police, and was found guilty on both charges. Brother Joel was savagely dragged from the back of the police van by the police as the other brothers looked on helplessly at the 3th. Brother Joel was charged with the use of threatening behaviour and assaulting police, and was found guilty on both charges.

ACTION NOW! to end victimisation

ASSAULTED

ASSAULTED

JOSHUA FRANCIS LAID UP IN BED AFTER POLICE ASSAULT.



STOP BRITISH COLLABORATION WITH FASCIST PORTUGAL !

CAETANO GET OUT !

NO!

DEMONSTRATION

Sunday 15th July

Assemble: 2.30 pm

Closing Cross Embankment

March to Hyde Park

SUPPORT the African liberation movements

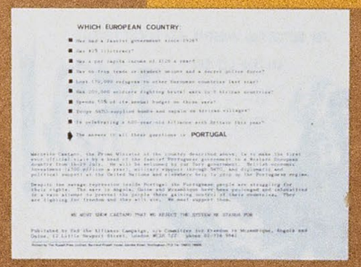
SOLIDARITY with the Portuguese people

BRITISH PORTUGESE ALLIANCE

600 years of murder & slavery

Heath Caetano

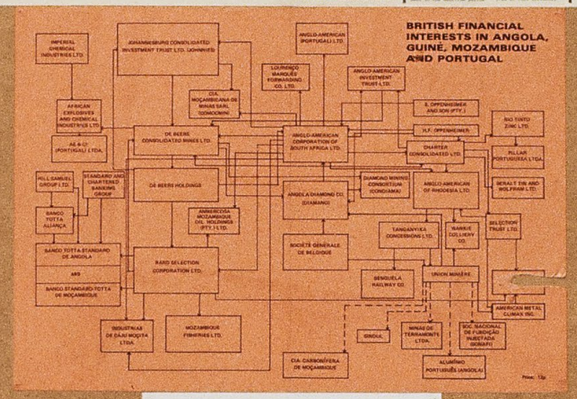
partners in crime



WHICH EUROPEAN COUNTRY

- Has had a fascist government since 1926?
- Has 41% illiteracy?
- Has a per capita income of $1200 a year?
- Has no free trade or student unions and a secret police force?
- Keeps 150,000 conscripts to crush freedom movements [illegible]
- Has 100,000 soldiers fighting brutal wars in 3 African countries?
- Spends 50% of its annual budget on these wars?
- Keeps 40% suppliers bombs and napalm to kill [illegible] villagers?
- Is celebrating a 600-year-old alliance with Britain this year?

The answer to all these questions is PORTUGAL



BRITISH FINANCIAL INTERESTS IN ANGOLA, GUINE, MOZAMBIQUE AND PORTUGAL

IMPERIAL CHEMICAL INDUSTRIES LTD.

JOHANNESBURG CONSOLIDATED INVESTMENT TRUST LTD. (JOHNNICS)

ANGLO-AMERICAN (PORTUGAL) LTD.

LOURENÇO MARQUES FORWARDING CO. LTD.

ANGLO-AMERICAN INVESTMENT TRUST LTD.

AFRICAN EXPLOSIVES AND CHEMICAL INDUSTRIES LTD.

CIA MOÇAMBICANA DE MINAS SARL (JOHNCOMIN)

S. OPPENHEIMER AND SON (PTY.) LTD.

AA & O (PORTUGAL) LTDA.

DE BEERS CONSOLIDATED MINES LTD.

ANGLO-AMERICAN CORPORATION OF SOUTH AFRICA LTD.

ANGLO AMERICAN CORPORATION (PTY.) LTD.

CHARTER CONSOLIDATED LTD.

HILL SAMUEL GROUP LTD.

STANDARD AND CHARTERED BANKING GROUP

DE BEERS HOLDINGS

DIAMOND MINING CORPORATION (CONGOMAN)

ANGLO-AMERICAN OF RHODESIA LTD.

BANCO TOTTA E ALIANÇA

ANGLO-ANGOLA DIAMANG DIAMANG

BANCO TOTTA STANDARD DE ANGOLA

BANCO TOTTA STANDARD DE MOÇAMBIQUE

RAND SELECTION CORPORATION LTD.

SOCIÉTÉ GÉNÉRALE DE BELGIQUE

UNION MINIÈRE

SELECTRONIC TRUST LTD.

SOCIEDADE DE DAIO MOSTA LTDA.

MOÇAMBIQUE FIBRATEX LTD.

BENGUELA RAILWAY CO.

MINAS DE TERRAMENTO LTDA.

AMERICAN METAL CLIMAX (MC)

SOC. NACIONAL DE FUNDIÇÃO (SUBTASA) (BORGES)

CIA. CARBONÍFERA DE MOÇAMBIQUE

ALUMÍNIO PORTUGUÊS (ANGOLA)

Price: 12p

We are all involved

END THE ALLIANCE

- Support the End the Alliance Campaign
- Oppose all national and local collaboration
- Expose British firms profiting from Portuguese colonialism
- Support the liberation movements

END THE ALLIANCE

Our Oldest Ally

Collective Colonialism

Wars and Profits

Portugal:

Symbolic Ceremonies

Africa:

Action Needed

End the Alliance

End British Collaboration in Portugal's Wars

Support the Liberation Movements

Solidarity with the Portuguese People

Fighting for Freedom

We are all involved

END THE ALLIANCE

- Support the End the Alliance Campaign
- Oppose all national and local collaboration
- Expose British firms profiting from Portuguese colonialism
- Support the liberation movements

END THE ALLIANCE

Our Oldest Ally

Collective Colonialism

Wars and Profits

Portugal:

Symbolic Ceremonies

Africa:

Action Needed

End the Alliance

End British Collaboration in Portugal's Wars

Support the Liberation Movements

Solidarity with the Portuguese People

Fighting for Freedom

Eddie Chambers, *Destruction of the National Front*, 1979-80.
4 screenprints on paper on card. Displayed 82.7 x 239.2cm.
Courtesy of Tate, London. Photo © Tate, London 2018,
artwork © Eddie Chambers

I am in a quandary, unable to reconcile a dilemma. The source of my problem comes from a desire to un-couple and de-privilege a sociopolitical reading of artworks by black-British artists in favour of drawing our attention to the aesthetic form and strategies that the work of art offers. Here, I refer to an essay by Jean Fisher, 'The Work Between Us' (1997), where she remarks on the discrepancies and tendencies to obscure the artwork by focusing on the geopolitical identity of its maker. She says: 'I should like to make a plea for visual art every-where. Or more specifically, to ask that we rethink the ways by which we frame art in order to return it to what is proper to art.'[1] More often than not, the framework to which Fisher alludes rarely places works of art within an art-historical context, or the genealogies of art practice. Noting her concerns, I am trying to find another way of talking about these works without relying on the familiar narratives of politics in art equals identity, which equals some insight into a subjective condition. These frameworks, as Fisher has suggested, distracts our attention away from the concerns of art, per se. The result of which, has become the formulation for discussing Black Art in Britain, defined as a discernible field of practice from the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s yet one that has often been reduced to an angry art devoid of a relationship with concurrent art practices, instead starting from the self – marked by the maker's position outside of the gendered, racial and sexual mainstream.

However, and here is the dilemma, there is a conjunction of social and political commentary within certain Modernist strategies that sits at the heart of many

[1] Jean Fisher, 'The Work Between Us', in *Trade Routes: History + Geography,* exhibition catalogue for second edition of the Johannesburg Biennale curated by Okwui Enwezor (Johannesburg: Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, 1997), pp. 20-3.

[2] See Guy Brett, 'Abstract Activist', *Art in America*, 1 February 1998, https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/from-the-archives-abstract-activist/, (accessed 26 September 2018).

works of art from the 1970s and into the 1980s, andin particular the two that form the basis of this essay: *For Oluwale* (1971-3/5) by *Rasheed Araeen and Destruction of the National Front* (1979-80) by Eddie Chambers – two artworks that I would suggest announced the beginnings of a discourse on Black Art in the United Kingdom.

Araeen has consistently been at the forefront of burgeoning art debates and practices. As many will know, Araeen was born in Pakistan and came to the UK in 1964. Having studied as a civil engineer, when he arrived in London via Paris, he was keen to join the debates of the new British sculpture exemplified by artists like Anthony Caro, Phillip King and William Tucker. As Guy Brett has remarked, Araeen was impressed by the apparent freedom of these artists' use of industrialised materials like 'brightly painted, cut-metal and moulded fiberglass',[2] but decided quite early on that there was a discrepancy, that these artists' free approach to non-traditional sculptural materials was not as rigorously or conceptually aligned with how they structured their artworks for display, which remained traditionally compositional. Araeen insisted on the realism of the thing itself, beyond compositional flourishes that harked back to a pictorialist tradition. Instead, he was able to reveal something concrete and immediate about the work's actual configuration in place and time. Brett explains:

> He conceived of spatial structures built of identical elements, symmetrically arranged, and [he] arrived early and independently at a form of 'Minimalism'. The structural principles had, for him, clear ideological implications: they produced a system which was non-hierarchical, not reliant on traditional ideas of craft, mass-producible,

> but which nevertheless produced a rich and subtle visual sensation for someone moving past them.[3]

In his early career, Araeen strongly identified with the Modernist claims of an International Style – purportedly open to all, put forward by what he believed to be the avant-garde in Europe. However, this identification was short lived, as, by the early 1970s, he became disillusioned with the British art establishment's refusal to engage with his interventions in this new departure for sculpture, on equal terms.

In his book *Art Since Pop* (1975), John A. Walker gives an account of the material and conceptual shifts that occurred for artists in Britain who were committed to pushing the boundaries of art practice within a sociopolitical context, as a response to the cul-de-sac that was becoming evident within traditional forms of painting and sculpture:

> Sculptors have traditionally favoured hard, durable materials in order to create rigid objects that remain constant in form. However, no sooner had Minimal art established itself publicly than a different attitude to form and a more catholic approach to materials was manifested...[4]

At this juncture, Araeen had shifted his practice towards expanding its kinetic potential. As an extension of Minimalism, he became part of a generation transforming the relations between the work of art, the viewer and how these relationships are

[3] Guy Brett, 'Introduction', in Rasheed Araeen, *Making Myself Visible* (London: Kala Press, 1984), p. 8.

[4] See John A. Walker, *Art Since Pop* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), p. 32.

[5] Rasheed Araeen, interview by Hoor Al Qasim, 'Rasheed Araeen: Before and After Minimalism', *Nafas Art Magazine*, May 2014, https://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2014/rasheed-araeen/, (accessed 29 August 2018).

understood in the wider public realm beyond the studio or the white cube gallery space. An example of this can be seen in *Chakras* (1969-70) the floating participatory event-sculptures where participants were invited to throw 16 fluorescent coloured Minimalist wooden disks into St Katherine's Dock next to his studio in London. The aim was not only to encourage viewers to become more self-aware of their environment, and in particular the polluted docks strewn with rubbish and woefully neglected, but to set in motion a relationship between the geometry and symmetry of the circular discs with the uncontrollable natural elements of water and wind.

Despite this new, open-ended exploration, Araeen, was finding it difficult to reconcile the shock of racism in the UK:

> In the early 1970s I went through a bad period despite the fact that I had been living and working in London since the mid-1960s. I was not getting any help from the institutions; private galleries didn't want to know me, so I was in a dilemma if not disenchanted. I had some friends who talked with me about the Black Panthers. Then I read a book that made me realise that I was caught in a new colonial situation.[5]

Araeen had been reading Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), as well as the writings of other anti-colonial thinkers like Amilcar Cabral and Paulo Freire, which was to prove pivotal for his practice.

In 1971, he came across a newspaper article about the death of David Oluwale at the hands of the state. He kept the article for a while, unsure of what to do with it, although recognising that it was important.

He was developing a keener sense of the role that art could play in the world at large. He goes on to say:

> By then I began thinking about how I could continue to make works of art. I had a close friend who was very well known named David Medalla and we talked a lot about art and politics. We joined together in opening Artists for Democracy.[6]

Araeen returned to the subject of Oluwale with a new critical focus.

Against the Odds

Like Araeen, Oluwale had come to the UK, this time from Nigeria. His intention was to study engineering, but he was unable to gain entry into a college. Oluwale became disheartened and was reduced to a life of vagrancy in Leeds where he suffered years of sustained and often violent mistreatment, and an untimely death in 1969 at the hands of the police. His case resulted in the first, and last, successful prosecution of British police officers for involvement in the death of a black person.[7] The trial in 1971 received national media coverage.

In *For Oluwale*, despite its apparent departure from the formal qualities of his earlier works, Araeen held on to his principles of sequential and repetitive processes that were not reliant on traditional ideas of craft and involved the reuse of mass-produced found objects. He also maintained a sense of perpetual motion, a principle of the kinetic, while overlaying it with different forms of iconography.

[7] See Harmit Athwall, 'The racism that kills', *The Guardian*, 18 October 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/oct/17/racism-asylum-seekers-uk-laws, (accessed 2 July 2018).

[8] Brett, 'Introduction', p. 8.

[9] Rasheed Araeen, *Essential Black Art, exhibition catalogue* (London: Chisenhale Gallery, 1988), https://chisenhale.org.uk/exhibition/essential-black-art/, (accessed 1 December 2016).

Using raw appropriated materials and hung like paintings rather than as reading matter, *For Oluwale* consists of four collaged panels of pamphlets, newsletter and newspaper clippings about the court case using the iconic mugshot of Oluwale. The newspaper accounts sit alongside other reports of racist abuse by the police and 'anti-imperialist' campaigns including copies of *Freedom News*, the UK Black Panther journal that Araeen was asked to produce, his first venture into publishing, as well as leaflets protesting the UK visit of the Portuguese Prime Minister Marcello Caetano. The time-capsule quality of the medium and the specific aesthetics of Xerox photocopies invoke the use of the much-loved Gestetner transfer duplicating machine that eschews the language of small-scale printing used by community activist groups. What some might call the 'anti-aesthetic' stance of radically left political art.

The artwork was first exhibited as part of a group exhibition *Artists from Five Continents* at the Swiss Cottage Library in London, in 1973. The content of the four collaged panels changed on a weekly basis through-out the four weeks of the exhibition, thus continuing Araeen'sinterest in both serialism and the kinetic. It is hard to imagine now, how confrontational such an encounter with the artwork might have been. Brett recalls that 'at the time, to reject so bluntly the kinds of discourse considered proper in the aesthetic space of the art gallery was unusual and a number of people complained'.[8]

Through its formal characteristics, as well as through its subject matter, I would argue that *For Oluwale* marks the first Black Art work made in the UK. To define the term Black Art, I use Araeen's own description, written some years later:

> Black Art is, in fact, a specific contemporary art

> practice that has emerged directly from the struggle of Asian, African and Caribbean people (i.e. black people) against racism and the work itself specifically deals with and expresses a 'human condition': the condition of black people resulting from their existence in a racist white society or/and in, global terms, from Western cultural imperialism.[9]

Rather than the familiar narrative of the time that situated artists of African and Asian descent and their practices as fundamentally from elsewhere, Araeen underscores that Black Art is an art practice that has emerged out of the conditions of a postcolonial experience within the contours of the West. To add weight to his proposition, we might also consider Irit Rogoff's cautionary observation, of what she outlines as the often ignored, but already existing 'cultural diversity within the traditions and geographical spaces of western art'.[10] There is a suggestion within Araeen's definition of Black Art that cultural context, an approach to artmaking and the subject matter are intertwined, not necessarily with an explicit medium bias, more as a concern to bring art into the reach of everyday life.

I Heard the News Today, Oh Boy!

When Picasso inserted a segment from the daily newspaper *Le Monde* into his bricolage *The Guitar* (1912), early twentieth-century audiences were catapulted from the contemplative realm of the pictorial to confront art's relationship to 'the real world'. As such, he traversed the space between aesthetics, politics and contemporary life. The same shock of the real

[10] Irit Rogoff, talk, *Globalising Art, Architecture and Design History* (GLAADH) conference, Middlesex University London, 2003. The GLAADH project took place between 2001 and 2003 and aimed to encourage art history departments to increase their understanding of the need for cultural diversity in the curriculum. The project was led by Professor Craig Clunas at Sussex University in partnership with Middlesex University (Kobena Mercer and Leon Wainwright) and the Open University.

(the here and now) has to be considered in relation to *For Oluwale*.

By taking artworks out into public space, as evidenced in *Chakras*, and by using material from actual events taking place in the world, in the case of Oluwale, one has to consider Araeen's artworks in relation to other radical art practices of the time that sought to intervene critically in the wider fabric of society. In this context it's worth considering the event variously referred to as the *British Women's Postal Art Event* and *Feministo: Portrait of the Artist as a Housewife* (1977) at the Institute for Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London, the projects of Stephen Willats, Conrad Atkinson's *Strike at Brannans* (1972) and the work of Luis Camnitzer who approaches art making as a political form of semiotic analysis where meaning is created through the juxtaposition of contextual signs and material symbols. Camnitzer's *Leftovers* (1970) is an unambiguous monument to the cruelty and human consequences of the repressive state regime in Uruguay at the time.

> During the 1970s, there was growing awareness of the representational power of the mass-media and the relationship it has with fine art. This wasexplored by the highly-influential television programme and book *Ways of Seeing* (1972 by John Berger, who was also informed by the deconstructive enquiries taken up by feminist cultural critics and artists about how images influence our understanding of gender – and by extension, non-mainstream – identities in society.

News reports have continued to provide a vehicle for artistic production, and as a device that asks us to consider how events are mediated. In a large-scale drawing *The Only Good Indian* (1985) Sutapa Biswas

constructs an image of a laughing female who peels the head of politician Norman Britton with a potato peeler while watching television. The influence of the news can be seen in Marlene Smith's sculptural installation *Bless This House: my mother opens the door at 7am, she is not bulletproof* (1985) also shown alongside Biswas at the ICA in London in *The Thin Black Line* (1985) an exhibition curated by Lubaina Himid. Smith's was a response to the police shooting of Cherry Groce. At the centre of an investigation into the retelling of the 1985 riots in Handsworth, Birmingham and Brixton, London, Black Audio Film Collective reused news reports and archival footage in their film *Handsworth Songs* (1987). The re-enactment in *The Battle of Orgreave* (1998) by Jeremy Deller was made in response to news reports of the Miner's Strike during 1984 and 1985. More recently, *State Britain* (2006) a meticulous reconstruction of Brian Haw's five-year peace campaign between 2001 and 2006, against the Iraq War on Parliament Square, is another example, for which Mark Wallinger won the Turner Prize in 2007.

While, formally at least, these examples vary widely from drawing to sculptural installation to archival footage to the performative, what they share is a critique of the state and state violence, and how it is mediated through mainstream media. Looking back to the decade preceding *For Oluwale* we should consider the widespread impact of Andy Warhol's newspaper works from the early 1960s like *Electric Chair* (1964) or *Birmingham Race Riot* (1964). As such, the use of newspaper clippings or television footage, reconstituted through collage, montage

[11] Stuart Hall in his essay *Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three 'Moments' in Post-war History* (2006) and Leon Wainwright in his book *Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean* (2011) are just two examples.

[12] Rasheed Araeen, 'The Success and the Failure of the Black Arts Movement', in *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Art in 1980s Britain*, eds David A. Bailey, Sonia Boyce and Ian Baucom (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 21-33.

and installation, becomes the means through which to convey the very conditions of representation itself. The rich discourse on the ideological implications that have been attributed to the technologies of mass reproduction, from Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935) to Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium is the Message* (1967), or even Jeff Wall's *Marks of Indifference* (1995) in his consideration of the relations between photojournalism and Conceptual art, all lay claim to the democratising effect of the medium, with an underlying drive to capture a sense of immediacy, and a desire for the work of art to be readily accessible in a non-exclusionary language. In this sense, Araeen's use of newspaper clippings and printed media is pointed. It uses the supposedly democratic medium as a marker, a means to broadcast how Oluwale, and political subjects from black communities in the UK to the plight of Palestinians have been subject to violent forms of exclusion and oppression.

Multiples from the Same DNA

The consensus in recent writings about Black Art in Britain, places Eddie Chambers, and in particular *Destruction of the National Front*, as the lead protagonist.[11] Araeen, in his essay 'The Success and the Failure of the Black Arts Movement', passes the baton to Chambers as the heir apparent to a radical Black Art agenda, when he remarks:

> It began in 1979, not long after Margaret Thatcher had come to power with her racist anti-immigration speeches, when a young black art student of Afro-Caribbean parents, doing his foundation course at Coventry Lanchester Polytechnic, tore up a printed image of the Union Jack and reorganized it

into an image of a swastika image. His name, of course, is Eddie Chambers, and what he then did was remarkable.[12]

In the late 1970s and into the 1980s, the predominant teaching mode in art schools up and down the UK was tied to Clement Greenberg's highly influential formalist theories. In particular, there was a belief that painting, as exemplified by abstract painters like John Hoyland, should confine itself to the exploration of its own material and image-making properties and 'liberate' itself from a pictorialist tradition. This doctrine was the dominant pedagogical discourse, despite the incursions of feminist art, Pop art, performance and new media art to name but a few. For an emerging generation of practitioners there was growing descent about the idea of 'art for art's sake', as it was colloquially – and, sometimes disparagingly – called. The autonomy of the art object as a self-referential practice absent of social comment was deemed to be elitist, self-indulgent and removed from lived experience.

Many of the black students at art school who attended the now famous First National Convention of Black Art in Wolverhampton in October 1982 organised by the BLK Art Group, expressed feelings of isolation and alienation. If, as was claimed at the time, Modernism was a universal language, then several of these students came to realise that they – by all accounts – had no legitimate claim to that language. That they had no legitimate subject position in relation to its discourse except on the other side of the Modernist coin in the realm of traditional arts by so-called primitive cultures, an old Western Modernist

[13] See Araeen, Essential Black Art.

[14] Gilane Tawadros, 'Beyond the Boundary: The Work of Three Black Women Artists in Britain', *Third Text*, vol. 3, no. 8-9, 1989, pp. 121-50.

ruse to denote an imagined backwardness with regards to its colonised 'other'. Here, Araeen's remarks about the objectives of Black Art explicitly underline that 'Black Art in its proper socio-political context [...] has little to do with Asian/African traditions'.[13]

In many ways, a reassessment of Modernism has already challenged where and how the influences of African, Asian and Oceanic art has shaped that story, however, Araeen's comments act as a rebuttal to the familiar framework and contextualising discourses through which black-British artists were being channelled. Gilane Tawadros has succinctly outlined how we can understand the diasporic experience that has come to represent a critical fissure within the European understanding of Modernism and modernity. These diasporic artists, as she insists, do not sit neatly within the narratives of the British nation-state, or for that matter, within the stories that the art establishment tells itself.[14]

Consisting of 4 collages, each measuring 14 by 12 inches, and using black, red, white and blue coloured paper, *Destruction of the National Front* articulates that space between formalism and a deconstructive impulse to dismantle the terms of late Modernism. Like Araeen's *For Oluwale*, there is, what could be argued, a temporal sequence across the work that again feels kinetic, moving sequentially from the iconographic towards abstraction. In the first panel, which is the signature panel, two highly charged signs are coupled: the Union Jack reshaped as a swastika. As each subsequent panel becomes dismembered, the fourth and final panel consists of a series of scattered pieces, entirely abstract and unrecognisable from its formative configuration.

What is immediately apparent in the artwork is a political commentary that could be seen as both at odds with and intimately linked to patriotism and ethnocentric (white) supremacy. It is important to remember that at the time of the making of the artwork, Britain was politically unable to reconcile its multicultural make-up, and this artwork emerged in the midst of Thatcher's highly inflammatory 'swamped' speech,[15] which fanned the flames of racial intolerance. Chambers, in an interview, comments:

> I...came of age in Britain at a time when notions of my identity were being heavily contested.What does it mean to come of age in a country where a significant number of its citizens, from Thatcher... to street goons, express a deep sense of ambivalence about the value of your presence? Your very presence is regarded not as a fact of being but as a justification for all sorts of vile anti-immigration sentiment as well as a justification for violence against black people. This is the wider context that a number of us were coming of age in and I think the art we made reflected a lot of these issues.[16]

Interestingly, given the work of art's emblematic status for announcing the Black Art movement in this watershed moment of 'coming of age', as Chambers elucidates, it is curious that the black body does not figure. However, I believe, a critique of 'whiteness', does. To put it another way, the Union Jack, at that time, was seen as a sign of 'indigenous' whiteness, despite the fact that the UK was grappling with post-war migration. Racism, as Araeen had already commented on, was never far away with the

[15] Abbreviated transcript of Margaret Thatcher, interview by Gordon Burns, *World in Action*, Granada TV, 27 January 1978, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103485, (accessed 1 September 2018).

[16] Eddie Chambers, interview by Ashish Ghadiali, 'Black artists and the DIY aesthetic', *Red Pepper*, 20 July 2017, https://www.redpepper.org.uk/eddie-chambers-black-artists-and-the-diy-aesthetic/, (accessed 2 September 2018).

[17] See Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), p. xviii.

[18] The poster to announce the First National Black Art Convention at Wolverhampton Polytechnic (now Wolverhampton University) in October 1982, organised by the Blk Art Group, https://www.blkartgroup.info/82conference.html, (accessed 2 September 2018).

militant presence of the National Front, as referenced in Chambers's artwork title.

Like Araeen, the aesthetics associated with low-brow popular culture or the mass-media would also influence the aesthetic choices of Chambers and his contemporaries. The period was a time of strident youth culture embattled with the prevailing order, as exemplified by the widespread influence of dub reggae and the legacies of punk. Both musical scenes had adopted a do-it-yourself attitude that delivered a postmodernist approach tightly bound to a Modernist past. To quote Simon Reynolds:

> [The] post punk years from 1978 to 1984 saw the systematic ransacking of twentieth-century modernist art and literature. The entire post punk period looks like an attempt to replay virtually every major modernist theme and technique ... Cabaret Voltaire borrowed their name from Dada. Pere Ubu took theirs from Alfred Jarry. [Using] techniques of collage and cut-up, the record cover artwork of the period matched the neo-modernist aspirations of the words and music, drawing from Constructivism, De Stijl, Bauhaus, John Heartfield and *Die Neue Typographie*.[17]

There are two almost contradictory lines of enquiry to be elicited from this quote in relation to *Destruction of the National Front.* In conjunction with a critique on the fascist potential of nationalism, there is also an implicit comment on the relatively unchallenged adoption of the swastika and other Nazi paraphernalia by the punk scene, what became known as Nazi chic, despite the declared anti-racist allegiances of many of those involved. However, in line with Simon Reynolds's comments about the use of an earlier Modernist mode, it is interesting to note how, if one looks at the

poster created to announce the First National Black Art Convention, for example, that the Blk Art Group were also employing a Neo-Constructivist design language,[18] which wouldn't look too out of place next to Constructivist design propaganda of the 1930s, albeit with an updated photocopy aesthetic.

It might prove interesting to consider *Destruction of the National Front* from another vantage point. I have always been struck by the tension between two particular moments of abstraction that Chambers's artwork speaks to: on the one hand, the formalist discourses of painting in the 1970s with figures like the aforementioned John Hoyland as well as Brice Marden.[19] These Colour-Field and Hard-Edged painters were caught up in a discourse on the 'frame', and what takes place within the rectangular arena in which painting operates. *Destruction of the National Front* seems to rehearse these arguments – as geometric shapes of paper act, literally, as framing devices. On the other hand, the artwork also seems to have a striking resemblance to the Dadaist chance experiments of Jean Arp, with works like *Collage with Squares Arranged to the Laws of Chance* (1916-17). Arp was working to free the art-making process from the demands to compose pictures. Again, there is an attempt to escape the pictorialist tradition. Across the four panels of *Destruction of the National Front* there are these very awkward dialogues with the frame and the immediacy of a readable and challenging set of signs; of the national flag and a political ideology based on racism – conjoined, that successively breaks down into something abstract, agitated and debased. The breakdown, or dismantling, speaks of a failure, a systemic collapse.

[19] Marden was coincidentally friends with and had a formal influence on Robert Mapplethorpe, who in turn influenced a little-known and hard to track down artwork by Chambers during the mid-1980s titled *My Jamaican Guy*, in which he makes reference to Robert Mapplethorpe's controversial *Man in a Polyester Suit* (1980).

[20] Massimiliano Gioni, 'It's Not the Glue that Makes the Collage', in *Collage: The Un-Monumental Picture* exhibition catalogue (New York: New Museum, 2007), p. 11.

Another reference point, specifically to do with collage as a form, is John Heartfield, who was regarded as one of the most political collagists of his time. Heartfield had originally been a member of Dada, but by the 1930s had grown tired of Dada antics. With the rise of fascism, he increasingly sought to make collages that would resonate with the working class.

Massimiliano Gioni, has argued for the links between the materiality of collage and its ability to speak politically:

> Since its very origin, collage has appeared as an art of crisis that has entertained a deep relationship with traumas and violations. There is something basic in collage, something almost guttural and visceral that immediately connects it with rupture and intervention. It's this sense of urgency that ricochets all through the twentieth century, with collage and its symbolic collisions resurfacing almost systematically at every new resurgence of collective panic and social change.[20]

One could read the symbolic register of 'social change' that Gioni speaks of, in the collage aesthetics of *Destruction of the National Front* as an expression of the UK's inability to come to terms with the changing face of multiracial Britain.

Performing Offstage

I want to finish by discussing the low-key, yet decisive enactment and re-enactment that Chambers allows us to think about. Given what has become the centrality and visibility of the black figure as corporeal excess within much of the work produced under the umbrella of Black Art during the 1980s (my own practice included), it is interesting to ponder on the performativity manifested 'offstage' in *Destruction of the National Front*.

What is striking, when one starts to consider the actions of its making, there is the echo of a serial, systemic and methodical process coupled with a seemingly random act, a certain arbitrariness that renders known signs, not only unrecognisable but debased. In order to make the four panels as a progressive and sequential collage Chambers would have had to set out four propositions as a deliberate and repetitive exercise, a form of setting out the terms, to then undo.

Intrinsic to paper-based collage is the gluing together of elements that create an abrupt physical juxtaposition. It is in these juxtapositions where the hauntings of Jean Arp and his laws of chance compositions, an ambivalence towards the formalist and self-referential doctrines of the 1970s and the political disappointments experienced, and structural gains made by Rasheed Araeen and those artists who were yet to emerge to wrestle, co-exist and converse.

I wish to return to Jean Fisher's comments in *The Work Between Us*, when she challenges us to appreciate the material and formal intelligence of the work of art as a 'body of knowledge'. A body of knowledge that she elucidates as 'what is proper to [the field of] art', an address that she refuses to eclipse or instrumentalise for other cultural agendas, but to deepen our understanding of how and why these works matter.